



on implementing special education in charter schools.

SPECIAL REPORT

When All Students Learn

By

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When All Students Learn

Introduction

All across the country the question raised is the same—what works in the area of special education? Although there is never just one answer to the question, there seem to be a number of common elements present in schools—regular and charter public, urban and rural—where students with disabilities are learning. In fact, in these schools, they are not just learning, but achieving on standardized tests at the same rate as their typically developing peers.

This article shares the common, school-level, elements of success which appear to contribute to the high achievement of students with disabilities. These elements are based on practice across the country in multiple states and districts. The aim of this review is to challenge educators to consider their own practice and validate the fact that all students can learn when supported in the right way with the right assistance in the right environment. The aim of this review is to open the minds of education leaders to the possibility and belief that, given these elements, all students can learn, including students with disabilities.

Elements of Success

- *Embracing all students from the top down*

One of the most important elements in a school in which all students learn is the top down support of a highly skilled school leader. This leader must not only understand the needs of the full spectrum of learners, but must be committed to creating an educational environment that serves the needs of all students. In a school in which all students learn, this commitment can be seen in every educator and staff member in the school beginning with the principal. The principal demands that this belief is embraced by every staff member in the school—administrative, general and special education staff, as well as academic, and clinical staff alike. The expectation is clear: all staff will embrace all students, own responsibility for the learning of each student, hold high expectations and a belief in the ability that every child, regardless of ability or eligibility, is a child capable of learning.

- *A Strong Special Education Leader*

Critical to learning for all students is the appointment of a strong special educator who is responsible for ensuring the learning of students with disabilities. This professional is certified and licensed per state and district requirements and holds a bachelor's degree or higher in special education. The special education leader is responsible for using the school wide curriculum as a basis for creating

data-driven academic programs for students with disabilities. The special educator modifies classroom-based instruction, coordinates and supervises all clinical and academic services; trains and supports both special and general education staff in working with students, co-teaches lessons and serves as technical expert for all staff in the area of special education. The special education leader is also responsible for ensuring that student identification, eligibility and services to meet special education needs are compliant with local, state, and federal law. This leader builds strong relationships with parents as critical partners in students' learning and reaches out to the community surrounding the school to offer additional resources to families whose needs extend beyond the school environment. Special education leaders in schools where all students learn have the trust of their principal, serve as members of the school management team and are empowered to lead their special education program.

- *Inclusion, a Continuum of Educational Options and the Tools to Support Learning*

Schools in which all students learn recognize that not all students can be fully included at all times. Such schools create an educational environment which substantively includes students with disabilities to the greatest extent possible in the regular education classroom. Inclusion is then supported/enhanced by a continuum of educational options including push-in and pull-out support and therapies provided in both individual and small groups, in and outside of the classroom. Schools also provide resource room support to remediate learning in core subject areas and provide educators with the resources they need to support learning including secondary reading and math programs that support the general education curriculum and tutoring before and after school. The most successful schools provide this same support to all students reaching beyond students with disabilities to include students without IEPs who are struggling both academically and behaviorally.. This decreases the stigma which often accompanies the special education label and encourages students' acceptance of one another by teaching students that we are all individual learners. Whatever the mix of environments, resources and supports, schools in which all students learn begin with the needs of students; they create their program in response to these needs, ensuring the best, most supportive equation which results in each student learning at his or her maximum potential.

- *Structure, Structure, Structure*

It may seem cliché, but schools in which all students learn recognize the need for a structured school environment, classroom and day. The strongest schools are built upon school-wide codes of conduct or clear and detailed behavioral expectations for all students. The school's code of conduct is known and accepted by students and parents alike and implemented consistently across all staff. It serves as a detailed blueprint for every child with consequences for both

poor and good behavior. The code also follows the legal guidelines for disciplining students with disabilities and ensures fair and equal treatment for all students. In general, students learn best when expectations are clear and where they believe that they have the power and the ability to succeed.

- *On-going Communication and Collaboration*

Schools in which all students learn have created on-going communication through the use of enhanced technology. Email, cell phones, text capability, web-based school calendars and websites through which staff access daily student information from their desk or their home, keep staff connected to one another and events affecting the school, the students and their learning. This on-going communication crosses special, general, administrative, full and part-time staff and includes academic and clinical providers and parents.

- *Trans-disciplinary Teaming*

Trans-disciplinary Teaming allows staff to work together across their professional areas of practice to create an integrated approach to meet the needs of each student. Educational, clinical and administrative staff use their shared knowledge of each child as the basis for building the strongest program of support. A speech language pathologist may assist the special education teacher in tailoring instruction based upon a linguistic area of strength or a social worker may work together with the general education teacher to increase a child's motivation for learning in the classroom. This collaboration results in the strongest educational program for each child.

- *Parents as Partners*

No one knows a child better than that child's parent. Building strong relationships with parents and making them equal partners in the creation and implementation of the education plan is critical to the success of every child. Schools in which all students learn are committed to their relationships with parents and welcome them as a critical element in the success of the school. On an individual level, parents are key to creating high quality and appropriate individualized education programs (IEPs) for their child as a member of the IEP Team. They offer academic, behavioral, developmental and historical data which serve as a vital part of the foundation for their child's education program. Parents also offer strategies and supports which have been successful in the home environment and may transfer in a positive way in the classroom. Parents in these schools are engaged in classrooms and afterschool as tutors and mentors, serve in lunch rooms, and on playgrounds, and engage the surrounding community in fundraising and other supportive efforts on behalf of the school. In some schools, parents serve as members of the school's governing board, giving feedback regarding student and parent needs and leading the direction of the school.

Summary

The two greatest reasons principals offer for failure of their school to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) are funding and special education. Despite this claim, there are many schools serving high percentages of students with disabilities nationwide who are achieving AYP. Even schools in inner-city public school systems serving impoverished students and families with a serious lack of educational, health and community resources have found a way to ensure that all students learn. These schools appear to share a number of common elements in the creation and design of their school and the way in which they serve students with disabilities.

Big or small, urban or rural, the overriding message that can be heard from high achieving schools is a belief that all students can learn. What is clear is this: if you create a school with the right leadership, staff, design and resources, all students, despite ability or challenge, can and will learn.